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DISTRICTS EARN AWARDS FOR ACHIEVEMENT IMPROVEMENTS

(DES MOINES, IOWA) – November 16, 2005 – Five districts were honored by the State Board of Education today for making significant improvement in existing student achievement gaps during the 2004-05 school year.

Ames, Chariton, Davis County, Grinnell-Newburg and Southeast Polk community school districts each received a “Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Award,” which were created by the State Board of Education to recognize successful district efforts to address chronic achievement gaps by improving instruction, curriculum and professional development opportunities for teachers.

The award recognizes districts that have improved achievement of a specified subgroup of students by 20 percent or more in at least one grade level and subject, without allowing any other subgroup or students generally to decrease by more than 5 percent in any grade level or subject, and that achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals districtwide and in at least one building. The five districts earned the award based on 2004-05 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED) assessments.

“This is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate one of the many positive things happening in Iowa schools,” said State Board President Gene Vincent. “It takes a tremendous commitment of resources and time and staff to make these kinds of gains in achievement. These five districts are to be commended for their efforts to help all students reach their highest potential.”

Highlights of the 2005 Breaking Barriers to Learning and Teaching Awards:

Ames improved reading achievement among 4th and 8th graders. The district is in its third year of a targeted reading focus that relies heavily on professional development for teachers, including training on using research and data, and taking that research into practice. Elementary classroom support staff in Title, ELL, and at-risk programs use materials that are directly aligned with general classroom materials, encouraging greater collaboration among all teachers. Middle school staff have found success with Project CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-Owned Strategies), which helps students better organize, understand, and retain course information. Students receiving the CRISS method of

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instruction will “learn how to learn.” Additionally, the Jamestown Reading series is used as an intervention to monitor student progress on IEP reading fluency and comprehension goals. Other interventions and strategies used with middle school students include fluency-building activities and practice, teach/re-teach comprehension strategies, literature circles, and guided reading

Chariton improved math achievement among 4th and 8th graders. Superintendent Bob Newsum said the district has emphasized and supported professional development for teachers, including more time for training in new instructional techniques as well as collaborative time for staff. Middle school staff and some elementary staff are using the Every Student Counts model to help boost math achievement, which is designed to give teachers tools and techniques for them to teach mathematics for understanding. It encourages school-wide change, and requires better communication and more dynamic cooperation among faculty, administration, and education agencies.

Davis County improved reading achievement among 4th and 8th graders. The district has used its Reading First grant to help put in place several strategies to boost literacy, particularly in full and sustained implementation of the professional development model. Fourth through 12th grade staffs also have been involved in an AEA-sponsored Literacy Team Development (LTD) to work on research-based strategies. The district also borrowed a “focus lesson” strategy from the Muscatine district, calling for students to spend 5-10 minutes each day in reading and math on a focus topic. Success at the elementary and middle school levels has been so impressive that the high school has asked to be included. Superintendent Anne Morgan also believes board and community support has been instrumental in boosting student achievement. The board assures the staff has professional development resources, the Cattlemen hosted a celebration for students and staff to honor the achievement gains, and the Parents in Education group sponsors dinner for teachers on parent-teacher conference nights.

Grinnell-Newburg improved reading achievement among 4th graders. The district analyzed its reading achievement data to determine specific areas that needed improvement, and then developed targeted strategies that would boost skills for learners at all achievement levels. Professional development provided by the area education agency provided teachers with new methods of vocabulary development, fluency and phonemic awareness. Teachers also reached out to parents and taught them simple ideas to use at home with their children to develop reading skills. Superintendent Dave Stoakes also credits the district’s after-school program, which provides tutoring assistance to students who need help in reading and math.

Southeast Polk improved reading achievement among 4th and 8th graders. Superintendent Tom Downs credits student progress to the district’s consistent and strategic focus on professional development and the presence of instructional support facilitators working from the classroom and building level to assist teachers in making instructional change, as well as strong community support. “We have parents who make sure their kids have good attendance, students who are ready to learn, high quality teachers who volunteer extra time, strong building leaders who set direction, a school board receptive and supportive of new ideas, and community businesses that help support special programs,” he said. An eight-week summer enrichment program for nonproficient junior high students was funded in part by a Prairie Meadows grant, with program assistance from Metro Waste, who helped provide science experiments, and Metro Arts Alliance who helped with arts programming. To boost achievement among students in special education, general education and special education teachers and their administrators at all levels schedule regular planning and collaboration time, and special education teachers are included in curriculum review and other meetings.